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SUBJECT Contra Terrorists

BOB EDWARDS: Two weeks ago, the United States Government said it had intelligence reports that Nicaragua was planning to attack U.S. installations in Honduras.

The United States warned that it would retaliate if that happened. But, along the tense borders between Honduras, Costa Rica and Nicaragua, it's not always easy to determine with precision just who was responsible for political violence.

A year-and-a-half ago an attempt was made on the life of Egan Pastore, leader of one of the rebel groups fighting the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. No one claimed responsibility for the attack, but both the Sandinistas and rival Contra rebel groups believed they had reason to kill Pastore.

Journalist Tony Abagan was injured in the attack on Pastore and has been investigating the story since then. Abagan now reports that a Contra terrorist group was responsible, and he says that group plans more violence, some of it against U.S. targets.

TONY ABAGAN: A dissident from the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, the largest group of Contras, says that he was attached to a highly secret terrorist unit active in Costa Rica and Honduras. He refers to himself as "a traitor to a dirty cause," and says that although he remains staunchly anti-Sandinista he is repulsed by the terrorist actions planned and executed by his unit.

This source says that it was his group which carried out the May 1984 bombing of the press conference by Nicaraguan rebel leader, Egan Pastore. That bombing killed three journalists and

seriously wounded some 20 others. The source has identified the terrorist who posed as journalist and brought the bomb to the press conference as Emark (?) Guerlio. He says Guerlio is a right wing Libyan who was recruited in Chile in early in 1984 by representatives of the FDN and the CIA. The source says the group is now about to launch a wave of terrorist actions designed to look as though they had been done by the Sandinistas. The aim, he says, is to provoke the United States into military retaliation against Nicaragua.

The source who says he was involved in the surveillance and planning of the Costa Rican part of the operation says possible targets include the United States Embassy, the Costa Rican presidential office building, newly arrived United States Ambassador, Lewis Toms, exiled Nicaraguan Indian leader, Brooklin (?) Rovera, and celebrated Nicaraguan draft dodger, Opnio (?) Lare.

EDWARDS: Tony, first of all, about your source. How do you know you can trust this source?

ABAGAN: We have been involved in the investigation for the last 14 months of the bombing of the Pastore press conference. This particular source was found by us. He did not come to us. We spent considerable time checking every detail of his story, and what he said fit with information we had already gathered.

We began with a great deal of skepticism, but after several months of debriefing of this person we came to trust him.

EDWARDS: What kind of corroborating evidence did your source provide that convinced you he was telling the truth?

ABAGAN: We have other sources that are close to this group, and before we met this particular source we began to get an idea of what the group looked like and what who was involved in it. This particular source gave us such details as dates of travel of members of the group, when they entered and left Costa Rica, and we checked this all very carefully with the Costa Rican immigration records, with other sources, and all of it checked out.

EDWARDS: Your source mentioned a Libyan involved in the bombing down there. The State Department says it was a Basque. How do you account for that?

ABAGAN: The State Department says that it was done by a Basque terrorist named LaHeur. In fact, after some checking, it was found out that Mr. LaHeur, at the time of the bombing and for several months before, had been in detention in France, so he

could not possibly have been the person who did it. Even though the State Department keeps coming up with name, we think that this was part of an intentional disinformation campaign.

EDWARDS: His unit, is it working under close supervision of the Contras or is that some sort of maverick group, not controlled by the Contras?

ABAGAN: He says that the group is in, quote, liaison with officials of the FDN and with agents of the CIA. Of course, there is no way to know the relationship of the these people that he views as being CIA agents with the overall organization. It's possible that there are maverick CIA people here, but he says that people who have been in meetings and have given us names are North Americans and introduced themselves as agents of the Central Intelligence Agency.

EDWARDS: It would be difficult to believe that the CIA would be involved in some sort of action that would result in terrorism against U.S. facilities, such as an embassy in Costa Rica.

ABAGAN: Yes. We also had a very hard time believing that, but with guidance from this particular source we have actually seen other members of this terrorist unit engaged in surveillance of the U.S. Embassy here in San Jose. We are sure that there is some action planned against the United States Embassy.

Of course, the question of how -- how high up in the CIA, or if the people who introduced themselves as CIA agents are in fact CIA agents isn't possible for us to tell.

EDWARDS: Your source believes that by going public with the story he'll prevent the kinds of actions he says are being planned?

ABAGAN: He thinks that this group should be stopped in one way or another. Since he began giving us this information some rather dramatic things have occurred. For instance, last week, while he was meeting with someone from our office, three people approached them, put guns to their heads and kidnapped them, took them to a farm in northern Costa Rica which is owned by a wealthy North American, and held them there for several hours. They took a chance and made a run for it. But they were shot at. They are now both in hiding, and since that time our office has received several threatening telephone calls saying that these two and we should not pass on the information we have, or our lives would be in danger.

EDWARDS: Reporter Tony Abagan, in Costa Rica.

NPR's foreign affairs correspondent Bill Busenberg has been checking into the allegations about a Contra terrorist group. He has this report on what U.S. officials have to say about it.

BILL BUSENBERG: The United States Government has made it clear that U.S. forces will take action against Nicaragua if there is a terrorist attack against American personnel anywhere in Central America, which is linked to the Sandinista government.

State Department spokesman Robert Smalley described that warning in these terms.

ROBERT SMALLEY: I want to reiterate that we would view Nicaraguan involvement in any terrorist act against U.S. personnel with the utmost seriousness. This is not a pretext for direct U.S. military action -- absolutely not. We are doing this because we want to protect the lives of U.S. citizens.

BUSENBERG: Administration officials have discussed limited American air strikes against training camps in Nicaragua as one possible response to a terrorist attack. But, State Department officials insist any such surgical strike would depend on reliable intelligence that the Sandinistas were indeed responsible for the terrorist action.

As one official put it, "We're not going to strike without darn good information that can be defended in closed door hearings on Capitol Hill."

State Department and intelligence officials further insist that the United States Government is not connected with any contra terrorist teams. The officials don't discount the fact that such maverick groups may exist on their own and may want to provoke deeper American involvement. We can't confirm or deny it, one official said. There are a lot of crazy people all over the place down there. He also used the terms Looney Tunes.

The official pointed out that the CIA has not had direct control of Contra forces since about June of 1984 when American funding was cutoff. U.S. humanitarian aid to the Contras is soon to be resumed, but not through the CIA.

In sum, U.S. officials say an independent Contra-led attack against U.S. facilities is not beyond the realm of possibility, and as such it's obviously a matter of concern. But such an action is not backed by the U.S. government, and officials realize they would have to pin any such terrorist attack on the Sandinistas before responding to it.

I'm Bill Busenberg, in Washington.